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# Stepping forward: A role for UTAS professional staff in the University's work integrated learning and teaching

**Linda Forbes**

University of Tasmania

[Linda.Forbes@utas.edu.au](mailto:Linda.Forbes@utas.edu.au)

**Chris Evans**

University of Tasmania

[Christine.Evans@utas.edu.au](mailto:Christine.Evans@utas.edu.au)

**Karmen Pemberton**

University of Tasmania

[Karmen.Pemberton@utas.edu.au](mailto:Karmen.Pemberton@utas.edu.au)

**Linda Luther**

University of Tasmania

[Linda.Luther@utas.edu.au](mailto:Linda.Luther@utas.edu.au)

The School of Computing and Information Systems offers a Graduate Diploma in Information Management. The program is cross-institutional, with Edith Cowan University (ECU) supplying the library-oriented units via distance education. Following concerns raised by students in focus group discussions with academic and Library staff, the University of Tasmania (UTAS) Library offered to take responsibility for the practical placement component of the course. As a result, in 2008, practising professional librarians coordinated the KXI 310 unit. This comprised coordinating two 30 hour professional placements for each of the 14 students in libraries across Tasmania, and designing and teaching the accompanying 12 hours of workshops, which provided students with the context for their professional placement. This paper describes how the planning, implementation and evaluation of this unit is an example of creative collaborations – between an academic school and professional staff in an administrative service centre; between UTAS Library and the Tasmanian library community; between the Library and the Centre for Advanced Learning and Teaching (CALT); and internally between practitioners in the Library. The experience is an example of an academic school using practising professionals from an administrative section to teach academic content providing the context for student learning in the workplace.

Keywords: librarians, work integrated learning, information management, professional placement

## Introduction

The School of Computing and Information Systems offers a Graduate Diploma in Information Management as a cross-institutional program with Edith Cowan University (ECU). ECU supplies the specifically library-oriented units via distance education. The course is accredited by the peak professional body, Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), and meets the qualification standards required for librarians, teacher-librarians and information managers. The course aims to “equip students with the fundamental knowledge, skills and capabilities to function effectively as information managers; give graduates a good understanding of the roles that information plays in society...; develop professional skills and appropriate attitudes in the areas of support of clients engaged in information retrieval and usage..., and provides an understanding of the principles and practice of information organisation and use of information management systems...” (School of Computing and Information Systems, 2008).

Since the course began in 2003, students have undertaken their professional placement experience in an ECU unit. Students located in Perth (WA) attend a series of workshops, providing a context for the placement and have their placements arranged by an ECU staff member. Students located in Tasmania, however, have not received these workshops and have been required to organise their placements themselves.

The School of Information Systems, University of Tasmania (UTAS) Library and ALIA's local liaison officer had been exploring how to improve the placement experience for UTAS students for some time, leading to the Library offering to coordinate the placement in 2008. The Library saw this as an opportunity to assist UTAS students to achieve a comparable experience to their Western Australian counterparts. It also fitted with the Library's vision of being a learning organisation as expressed in its Workforce Plan (2006): the course would encourage Library staff to engage in learning and to transfer knowledge between staff. The Library believed it could offer students access to host libraries of which they may otherwise have remained unaware and introduce them to a wider range of professional roles than they could reach on their own. The Library also saw an opportunity to take on a leadership role in the Tasmanian profession. This would occur through organising the placements and hosting significant numbers of students itself, and also by improving the perception of professional placements amongst host libraries by eliminating multiple 'cold callers' trying to solicit places.

Involving professional Library staff in the University's academic program is not new. Liaison and branch librarians have close relationships with faculties, schools and individual academics, and work collaboratively to embed information literacy skills into academic units. They often teach information skills sessions within specific academic programs. The new medical curriculum, for instance, includes an information literacy stream within CAM 101, Foundations of Medicine. Coordinating, creating content and delivering a complete academic unit, however, was innovative.

The School of Information Systems merged with the School of Computing at the end of 2007. The new course coordinator for the Graduate Diploma of Information Management did not have a library background and was not familiar with the library content of the course. Collaborating with the University's practising professionals to deliver this unit was a neat solution to an obvious problem.

The Library received confirmation in February 2008 that it would be coordinating the KXI 310 Information Management Professional Placement unit, which contained both placements and workshops. The unit replaced the ECU unit and ran in the 'winter school' beginning in April 2008 with an enrolment of 14 students.

### **Work integrated learning framework**

Work integrated learning is a current issue in the higher education sector. Milne (2007), for example, described how work integrated learning brings together theory and practice and enables students to apply theory in a real situation and to draw on practical experience when discussing theory. The Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) hosted the 2008 WACE Asia Pacific Conference in Sydney on the theme of excellence in work integrated learning. Papers were presented on the themes of creating high quality work integrated learning experiences, enhancing teaching and learning outcomes, and developing employability skills in a global skills shortage environment. In addition, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) is funding a national project: *Work Integrated*

*Learning: A national framework for initiatives to support best practice*, which aims to improve the educational experience of students across the sector.

The University's Teaching and Learning Guidelines for Workplace Learning (University of Tasmania, 2006) define this learning as providing students with "practical experience in the application of theoretical concepts and knowledge, and is generally designed to enable students to practise the skills of the profession in a real-life setting."

UTAS Library, like many other Tasmanian libraries, has a long tradition of hosting placements for both professional and para-professional students from a number of TAFE and tertiary institutions. ALIA (2006) holds as a key principle that "library and information agency employers have a key responsibility to support and assist education providers in producing graduates capable of providing quality information services. They also have a responsibility to provide opportunities for workplace learning."

ALIA's statement also encourages employers to provide teaching and related support to educational institutions and this often takes place via consultation between employers and academics, and employer involvement in specific teaching activities. Giving practising professionals responsibility for unit coordination and the development of academic content - shifting from professional practice towards academic practice - is somewhat rarer and has not been noted by the authors in any professional reading.

An email survey of deputy and associate librarians at all Australian universities in August 2008 revealed that only one of the 20 respondents, University of South Australia (UniSA), designs and delivers units in professional library and information management courses. In addition, four respondents have staff involved in sessional teaching, guest lecturing or marking, two of them as a private arrangement rather than an institutional one (Quilliam, 2008). With respect to UniSA, the UniSA Library has a long association with librarianship education. In 1999 the library developed a Certificate in Library Professional Practice which provided five graduates with a 16 week placement program. This was provided as there was minimal placement provision within the Graduate Diploma program (Luzecy, 2000). UniSA Library now designs and delivers a unit 'Organising Resources' within the course, and hosts a student on placement but does not coordinate that unit (Quilliam, 2008).

A workplace learning mapping study was conducted at UTAS in 2006. It recommended that "workplace learning programs across the University be better coordinated and resourced with a view to ... better integrating workplace learning programs into courses rather than being seen as an 'add on' experience" (Coskun, 2007, p. 10). Including 12 hours of workshop content in KXI 310 to provide a context and preparation for the placement is an example of the School of Computing and Information Systems and the Library working together to achieve this aim.

One method of encouraging students to link theoretical concepts and knowledge with their application in practical experience is reflection. In the literature on reflective practice and its role in professional education, Poikela (2004, p. 267) sees "the key abilities for lifelong learning processes are formed through reflective learning involved in assessing one's own and others' action in order to develop critical thinking about social reality." A key aspect of the workshops was to introduce to the students the concept of reflecting on their profession, learning to "question their own actions, reconsider their knowledge and understanding in the light of experience" (Loughran, 1996, p. 6).

This paper describes how UTAS librarians took responsibility for planning, delivering and evaluating an academic unit that provided context for student learning in the workplace and an opportunity to experience a range of professional roles.

## **Method**

The University Librarian, as Unit Coordinator, assembled a small team of Library staff with broad and differing skills to begin planning the unit content. The team comprised Karmen Pemberton, who had strong networks in public libraries, Chris Evans with significant teaching experience in delivering information literacy programs, Linda Forbes, with strengths in documentation and project management, and Linda Luther with experience in team coordination and student assessment. Separate roles of Workshop Coordinator and Practical Placement Coordinator were agreed and actions necessary in each of those areas were identified. An overarching timeline and a schedule of regular meetings were established.

The team drew on course content from ECU and Charles Sturt University placement units and the information they provided to hosts and students. The unit had to comply with UTAS policy, procedures and guidelines for workplace learning (University of Tasmania, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). The Library's past experiences as a host were reflected upon and considered for inclusion in the unit design. A unit outline was written, drawing on all these sources and team members' experiences as practising professionals. The team collaborated with staff from Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) to develop learning outcomes, generic attributes and criterion-referenced assessment rubrics.

The ECU unit had included one 60 hour placement. UTAS Library had suggested to the School that two placements – one in a large library like UTAS or the State Library, and one in a smaller library – would expose students to a much wider range of professional roles and settings and allow students to draw comparisons and reflect on the differences between them. Placements were subsequently organised with school, college, tertiary, public libraries and government department libraries such as the Parliamentary Library, Heritage Library and Treasury.

Having a range of libraries involved had an impact on the workshop content that preceded the placements. The UTAS team considered what was covered in the three other library units of the Diploma, and ALIA's policy relating to core knowledge and skills (2005). Recent past graduates were invited to a focus group discussion and asked what they felt was needed to prepare students for placement. The team then searched the literature to identify key issues for new professionals and for the profession as a whole. This informed not only the workshop design and topics but also the readings recommended for each workshop.

The workshops needed to cover the fundamentals of a broad range of professional practices and give a sound context to the range of libraries, their different clients and their varying structures and services. Students can undertake this unit at any time in their course – for some it was the first of their library units, for others their last. This was taken into account so that new students could use the unit as a framework, while for the more advanced students; theoretical information already learned could be set in context. Based on the theories of reflection developed by Schön (1983), the team also wanted students to reflect on why they wanted to be librarians, what they thought they would do as professionals, and to use their

placements to re-evaluate those things in the light of experience. In preparation for discussion in the workshops, students were asked to gather evidence from the literature to support their expectations of professional roles and activities.

The unit included 12 hours of workshops (six 2-hour sessions) and three assignment topics. Reflective practice, role-play, group discussion and self-motivated learning were key aspects of the workshop design. Since the students were located across the state it was decided to deliver the first five face-to-face workshops in a block over two days. The workshop program for KXI 310 is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Workshop program for KXI 310**

Workshop 1	Overview of information services
Workshop 2	Reference services, the reference interview
Workshop 3	Information services in different settings – panel with local professionals from different library services
Workshop 4	Services supporting reference – relationships with other professional roles
Workshop 5	Information services in the real world – preparing for practice
Workshop 6	Placement feedback session

Students completed a feedback form after the workshops. The form sought qualitative feedback by asking students to rate the workshop content and activities, duration of session and question time, presenter's clarity and preparation and quality of support resources on four-point Likert scales with the levels "Excellent", "Good", "Satisfactory" and "Poor". Students were also able to make open-ended comments and suggestions for improvement. Elements of the feedback were incorporated into the sixth workshop.

Workshop 6 was held after the placements had been completed and before the final assessment was due. This allowed students to share their experiences and reflect, individually and as a group, on the commonalities and differences between different library settings. Small groups of students considered the benefits and timing of the unit and how prepared they felt for their placements. The groups shared their thoughts with each other via butcher's paper. The positive feedback and constructive criticisms have been reported to the Course Coordinator. Each placement host submitted a feedback form to the Unit Coordinator, identifying the experiences offered to the student, and giving their assessment of the student's strengths and areas of the student's knowledge requiring further development.

The published entry in the unit handbook included three assessment tasks – two practicum reports and an essay. The unit team had to define the assessment tasks and develop the criteria for each task. The practicum reports required students to identify a range of professional roles,

reflect on how their placements had enhanced their understanding of those roles and include evidence of their own reflection and professional learning. The essay required students to compare their two placement experiences, identify differences in practice between library settings and discuss these differences with reference to the professional literature. Each of the assessment tasks supported the stated learning outcomes for the unit: to outline the current functions of information services and the roles of librarians and describe how these functions and roles may change in the future; to explain how information resources, both print and electronic, are accessed, controlled and discovered to meet client needs; and to reflect on professional library practice in different library settings.

A MyLO course was created to support face-to-face teaching, and tracking of student activity was a useful indicator of their engagement with the support materials. Several students used MyLO discussion postings to ask questions about process and assignment topics, allowing the team to review and refine action in the areas of concern. The final workshop included asking students to use the MyLO discussion functionality to write a hypothetical letter of advice about the unit to future KXI 310 students. This was a reflective exercise and these letters were accessible only to staff teaching the unit.

At the end of the program all students had satisfactorily completed the unit and achieved the learning outcomes. An evaluation of the unit was prepared for the School of Computing and Information Systems. This comprised a summary of the feedback from students on the first series of workshops and their letters to next year's students. Written feedback from the placement hosts was summarised. The teaching team's reflections that had accumulated through the planning and teaching of the unit were incorporated. The evaluation provided input for planning and recommendations for changes to the unit for 2009.

## Evaluation

### Students

The results of the qualitative feedback form completed by students after the first five workshops were very positive, as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Student ratings of the workshops**

		Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor
Content	/13	10	2	1	
Activities	/13	6	6	1	
Time for Questions	/12	5	7		
Duration of sessions	/13	(Just Right) 10	(Good) 1	(Too Long) 2	(Too Short)
Presenters' Preparation	/13	12	1		
Clarity of Presentations	/12	10	1	1	
Support Resources	/13	9	3	1	

The open-ended comments submitted with these forms suggest that the students found their involvement and exposure to a range of practising professionals to be a very stimulating and beneficial aspect of the course. Overall, the unit was described by students as motivational and providing a much-needed context for their librarianship studies. The content of the

workshops was viewed as an excellent preparation for their practical placements (77% of students rated content as Excellent). The panel workshop, where librarians from many different library and information services described their roles, was a highlight. Feedback responses included:

*It showed all the different places where the course could lead.*

*So exciting to see diversity of jobs even in a relatively small place like Hobart and to get sense of community/collegial exchange.*

The students were also appreciative of being able to meet each other face-to-face for the first time in their course and used the opportunity to establish an ongoing network of support and assistance. As these students spend much of their course in units with students from other subject areas, the chance to form a 'group' was a major theme of the letters written to next year's students, for example

*If I had the chance to start the course again I'd quickly establish contact with the other students...it's good to discuss coursework from a librarianship perspective rather than an Information Systems perspective.*

*Make friends within your course, and particularly within this Unit...the people in your course are experiencing the same things as you, and it is great to reflect and interact with people who are participating in a similar experience.*

Placement hosts, in their feedback reports, highlighted the need for students to have a greater familiarity with practical tasks and a greater appreciation of the distinction between professional and para-professional roles. Their reports also indicated the need for clearer advice to students and hosts on the expectations of the placement experience as providing an understanding of professional roles rather than training students in any particular task.

### **Staff**

The Library staff involved in planning and delivering the unit found that expanding their professional role enhanced their own learning. While much of the content of the workshops was familiar – it's what we do – there was licence to reflect on roles, responsibilities and practices in a way not normally required in day-to-day activities. New concepts like the development of learning outcomes and criterion referenced assessments gave opportunities for close collaboration with divisional colleagues from CALT and helped promote a greater understanding of CALT's role in supporting academics. The unit was a professional learning opportunity allowing the Library to further explore the academic environment, over and above teaching information skills.

The team found that planning, delivering and evaluating the unit required them to collaborate as peers and that the diversity in their professional backgrounds gave the team a breadth of experience no individual could have brought to the content. This experience is supported by Boud (1999, p. 6), who describes peer learning as "participants working together to develop skills of collaboration. This gives them practice in planning and teamwork and involves them as part of a learning community in which they have a stake." Furthermore, Boud identifies that this approach offers "increased possibilities for participants to engage in reflection and exploration of ideas" (1999, p. 5). This paper is evidence that the learning continues after teaching the unit has been completed.

The unit gave the UTAS Library an opportunity to strengthen collaboration with the Tasmanian library community. As one of the two large library systems in Tasmania, the other being the State Library, UTAS Library has a responsibility to demonstrate leadership in



educating and supporting upcoming professionals. Hosting professional placements allows a library to have a small impact on a developing professional and, sometimes, to identify a future member of staff. Coordinating and teaching KXI 310 is an opportunity to contribute in a much greater way to the development of “professionally-oriented graduates who are equipped with skill sets which are matched to contemporary industry needs” (Swinburne University of Technology, 2008).

The success of the UTAS Library professional staff involvement in the University’s teaching of this unit is an example of creative collaborations – between an academic school and professional staff in an administrative service centre; between UTAS Library and the Tasmanian library community; between the Library and CALT; and internally between practitioners in the Library.

In seeking to better integrate academic content into a placement unit to improve the workplace learning of developing professionals, the Library stepped forward into the academic environment in a new way. Planning the unit involved defining the context for the placement and linking theoretical content with preparation for real-world experience in a way that would enhance learning opportunities. Evaluation and analysis of feedback during the unit allowed refinement of the content of the final workshop and the development of a comprehensive report to the School on what had been done. That report includes recommendations for future action – about the timing of the unit in the academic year, about the weighting of assignments which unfairly penalised students who improved through the assessment process, and about improving the opportunities for the students to get to know each other early in their course.

Planning for the 2009 unit will also include re-examination of some elements in light of what the team learnt this year. Marking against the assessment rubrics demonstrated that there are improvements to be made in the wording of criteria and in discriminating between achievement levels. Further collaboration with the School and ECU about the content of the other library-oriented units would allow KXI 310 to develop improved connections and relationships with those units.

## **Conclusion**

In taking responsibility for the KXI 310 unit in the Graduate Diploma of Information Management course, the UTAS Library sought to improve the professional placement experience for developing library professionals and to provide a relevant theoretical framework in preparation for practice. Working collaboratively with the School of Computing and Information Systems, CALT and the Tasmanian library community brought positive benefits to the students, the School and the Library staff, while supporting ALIA’s principle that “Library and information professionals need to acquire the relevant disciplinary expertise, demonstrate employment-related skills and be prepared for a challenging and dynamic future” (2005).

As an example of using the skills and competencies of practising professionals to design and deliver academic content, the Library believes it has a good model for work integrated learning that could be considered by other areas of the University. The Workplace Learning - Mapping Study final report (Coskun, 2007) identified benefits for the student, the employer and the University in work integrated learning. The University is one of the major employers of librarians in Tasmania, and is a leader in the profession in this state. It is therefore of value

to all concerned that UTAS Library stepped forward to coordinate this unit; we are educating our future employees and future professional colleagues.

The benefits of the Library's experience to the students, the School, the Library and the professional community are just as relevant to other professions. Are there opportunities for professional staff from Financial Services, Human Resources, Student Services and Asset Management Services, for example, to step forward into academic programs in new ways?

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